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Brian Michael Jenkins



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PREFACE

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FIGHTING TERRORISM: AN ENDURING TASK

Brian Michael Jenkins

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The following interview with ADN-Kronos, an Italian news service, was first published in *Il Messaggero*. Subsequently it appeared in several European newspapers. *The Washington Post* carried an abbreviated version of it on February 1.

1. *Much is said about the international connections of Italian terrorism, for example, with the PLO, the IRA, and the German terrorists, but until now no concrete evidence has been found to support this thesis. Do you believe that these connections really exist?*

The discovery of Soviet missiles in the hands of Italian terrorists (although reportedly not intended for use in Italy) and the Peci revelations indicate connections between the Red Brigades and terrorist groups in other countries including the Palestinians. Reportedly, an Italian participated in the 1975 attack on Orly Airport and Italian terrorists have received training in the Middle East. I believe connections exist; however, we should not exaggerate their importance. The idea of a global conspiracy behind terrorism, in my view, belongs to the realm of fiction. Putting aside foreign-based terrorists who may occasionally operate in Italy, terrorism in Italy is parochial. It seeks its constituency among Italians, not the oppressed of the Third World, or other vague audiences. Its targets are Italian. Its connections to the Middle East or terrorist groups in other countries have only modest logistical importance. They are not an umbilical cord.

2. *During a recent meeting in Strasbourg on the subject of terrorism, it was proposed to assemble a European anti-terrorism super police force, with a single operative headquarters. In your opinion, would this be a valid solution, or would it end up as a bureaucratic roadblock?*

A European super police force with a single headquarters to fight against terrorism is an attractive idea but there are many political and legal impediments. In fact, cooperation among the police forces of Europe has increased. Increasing cooperation can be expected to continue so long as terrorism is perceived as a mutual problem affecting all or most European countries. This applies to terrorism of European origin. Foreign policy differences, plus economic considerations, have made cooperation in dealing with terrorism emanating from the Middle East somewhat more difficult.

3. What are the differences between Italian terrorism and that of other countries?

Terrorist groups everywhere use similar tactics, have similar organizational structures, and share common ideologies, although upon close examination I think we would find significant differences between the Marxist-Leninist ideology espoused by the Red Brigades and that followed by the Red Army Faction of Germany or that, say, of the provisional wing of the Irish Republic Army. Terrorist groups bear a certain resemblance to each other demographically. Terrorists also appear to share many other attributes: a total reduction of life to political terms, a black-and-white view of the world, a dedication to action, an almost abnormal fascination with the instruments of violence, an inclination to take risks, perhaps to demonstrate their dedication to themselves and others. Beyond these superficial similarities there are significant differences in objectives, strategy, and *modus operandi* not only among terrorist groups in different countries but among the different terrorist groups in Italy. Terrorists are not extraterrestrial. They emerge from the political soil of a specific situation or country. For reasons I have already alluded to, this is especially true of Italian terrorists who are rooted in Italian history, Italian politics, and Italian economic conditions.

4. Why hasn't terrorism in the United States reached the tragic levels attained in other countries?

The perception that little terrorism has occurred in the United States is somewhat misleading. In terms of the sheer number of terrorist incidents, without an adjustment for the size of its population, the United States ranks among those countries where terrorism is seen

to be a major problem: Italy, Spain, Germany. How then do we account for the impression that the United States is relatively immune to terrorist violence? First, terrorism in the U.S. has been less lethal, directed against property, not people. Symbolic bombings without casualties comprise the vast majority of all terrorist incidents here. If we count only deaths caused by terrorists and adjust for disparities in population, then Italy has suffered roughly five times as much terrorism as the United States. Second, people's perceptions of terrorism are determined not by statistics but rather by spectacular acts. We have witnessed few spectacular acts here, only one political kidnapping, that of Patty Hearst, nothing comparable to the Moro or D'Urso episodes. Third, the high level of violent crime in the United States overshadows the comparatively low level of political violence. With more than 20,000 homicides a year and thousands of armed robberies, fewer than 80 deaths as a result of political violence during the last 10 years hardly seems significant or frightening.

In a society so heavily armed and apparently so prone to personal violence, why is there comparatively so little political violence? Ideology or ethnic separatism are the motors of terrorism in Europe. Although numerous ethnic minorities make up the population of the United States, and ethnic consciousness in the United States has increased, ethnic-based separatist movements have not been a feature of American history. There are few locally distinct cultures and histories that could give rise to separatist tendencies, nothing comparable to Spain's Basque provinces or a Northern Ireland.

Neither has ideology been a powerful force in American history. Frontier society and the individualistic nature of American society did not lend themselves to class consciousness. Somehow the United States escaped the ideological contests that divided countries in Europe and Asia in the twentieth century. The new left of the 1960s was not so much ideologically motivated as it was oriented on a single issue: the war in Vietnam. The abolition of the draft and the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam deprived the handful of bomb throwers within the movement of a constituency. They remained a handful.

The American style of violence reflects American society. Historically Americans have readily turned to guns or bombs to resolve individual quarrels or to express themselves on broader issues. In a highly individualistic society, violence in America also is highly individualistic. The person who throws a bomb to protest a perceived grievance against the political system joins the person who throws a bomb to settle a personal score and becomes a small part of a larger spectrum of criminal violence.

5. *Are there measures, in your opinion, in addition to repression, that could prevent the spread of terrorism?*

In my opinion, perhaps the greatest danger posed by terrorism, and indeed, sometimes its intended effect, is that it creates an atmosphere of fear and alarm in which a frightened populace will clamor for Draconian measures, totalitarian solutions. The temptation to repression in the South American style may become irresistible. At a recent conference on the defense of democracy against terrorism in Europe, members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe argued that terrorism should be fought with even more democracy. I know it sounds trite, but it was not merely the rhetoric of politicians. It represented a recognition that a certain amount of political violence is a price paid for a free and open society. Terrorism, or at least public knowledge of it, is absent only in totalitarian states, and even there not entirely. Combatting terrorism is a tough task in a democracy. I get nervous when people start talking about *eradicating* terrorism.

A strategy against terrorism may have several components. One component comprises those measures aimed at the terrorist themselves: good intelligence, effective police work, a functioning criminal justice system. Italy has had enormous success in this area during the past two years.

Law enforcement by itself may not suffice especially where the terrorists may have a large constituency of sympathizers, a deep reservoir of recruits, and terrorism persists. The government may then also have to consider a broader political strategy. It may have to deal with the underlying conditions that produce new generations of terrorists. We ought not to have any illusions about what such measures will accomplish. Reforms will not placate terrorists. Many of the issues on

behalf of which terrorists claim to be fighting are either intractable or not legitimate. Those aiming at the destruction of the state are uninterested in compromise. However, in some cases, political solutions may deprive terrorists of a constituency, undermine their claims to legitimacy, and reduce their reservoir of potential recruits or sympathizers.

A third component comprises those measures aimed at combatting the atmosphere of alarm created by the terrorists. This involves tasks of public education, reassertion of basic moral values and democratic principles, the maintenance of at least the appearance of government competence, rejection of the idea that terrorism can be eradicated quickly or entirely, and that the government's failure to do so is a sign of impotence. Without devaluing human life, it might also be pointed out that terrorism at least at its current level is a bearable price. A comparison of the toll of terrorism versus the toll of ordinary crime should serve to reduce an exaggerated sense of alarm caused by a relatively few, albeit dramatic deaths.

6. *The kidnapping of important persons, their threatened proletarian trials and summary executions, are all typical of Italian and German terrorism. What should be the attitude of the authorities toward these cases?*

The first general rule in dealing with individual hostage cases is that there are no general rules I know of--no recipes to follow. There are, of course, policies. Governments generally have been growing more resistant to meeting the demands of terrorists holding hostages, and have demonstrated their willingness to use force to end such situations. Public opinion has supported this trend. As a result, measured by anything other than publicity, the success rate of terrorists has been declining. Terrorism also seems to be on a downhill slope of publicity. The news value of another assassination, another kidnapping diminishes as such things, regrettably, have become almost routine, except for the occasional spectacular event. Ironically, while extensive media coverage tends to magnify individual terrorist episodes, continuing media coverage ultimately deflates their effect by making them commonplace.

7. *During the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, correspondents from the U.S. talked about an opinion in your country that Italian-type terrorism could proliferate in the United States. What has been done in these two years to avoid such a danger?*

Although the United States is not immune to terrorism, as I have already pointed out, fortunately "a type of terrorism like the Italian one" has not proliferated in the United States. We have been concerned mainly with terrorism abroad. According to statistics published by the Department of State, of approximately 7,300 international terrorist incidents that occurred between January 1968 and October 1980, 2,700--more than a third--were directed at U.S. citizens or installations; 173 Americans were killed, 970 were injured. The crisis that began with the seizure of the American Embassy in Iran has been our major preoccupation. Although the hostage question was not made an issue in the presidential campaign, it did have some effect on national politics. The aborted rescue attempt led to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's resignation; he had opposed the action. Writing after the election, President Carter's principal political adviser blamed Carter's defeat on the hostage crisis.

Domestically, several incidents caused concern: the assassination of a former Iranian official in Washington; the assassination of a Cuban diplomat by anti-Castro extremists in New York; bombings by Croatians, Armenians, Taiwan separatists; attacks by Puerto Rican separatists. All these suggest that terrorism, whether directed against American citizens abroad or carried out within the United States, will be a continuing problem.

The government has focused its program to combat terrorism in five areas: prediction through effective intelligence; prevention through increased security at likely terrorist targets; contingency planning through an interdepartmental working group on terrorism; crisis management to respond effectively to those incidents that may occur, and international cooperation through multilateral agreements with other nations.

None of these measures will end terrorism. It is an enduring task.

8. In the fight against terrorism, is it necessary or not to publish press releases and theses of the terrorists, for example, to save the life of a hostage?

I reject the idea of censorship by governments or by terrorists. And it is censorship if terrorists seek to control the news whether by

murdering journalists who criticize them, or by threatening to murder hostages unless their communiquees are published.

The question of whether to publish terrorist manifestos brings up two broader questions: What role do the media play with regard to terrorism? What responsibilities, if any, do the media have when terrorist incidents occur, particularly hostage situations where lives are at stake?

To have maximum effect, an act of terrorism must be seen. The news media provide an essential link between the central figures in the drama--the terrorists and their victims and the intended audience. This has led many people to the conclusion that if the link between the terrorists and their audience was severed, that is, if terrorist incidents were not reported, the effects of terrorism would be reduced, in terms of the widespread alarm that the terrorists create. Consequently, political fanatics would be less inclined to use terrorist tactics, which if unreported would have little effect.

However, to say that the news media provide this essential link is not to say that they are responsible for terrorism. In my view, the news media are responsible for terrorism to about the same extent that commercial aviation is responsible for airline hijackings. The vast communications network that makes up the news media is simply another vulnerability in a technologically advanced and free society.

If not directly responsible for terrorism, what are the responsibilities of the news media in dealing with the problem? The press is not legally responsible to government. The constitutions of most democracies guarantee the right of a free press. They do not define the responsibilities of the press to the state. That is usually the mark of a totalitarian system where the press is considered to be an instrument of the state.

It is not the law but rather unwritten principles that make up the responsibilities of the news media. First, inherent in the purpose of a free press, which is to keep the public informed, lies an obligation to truth or factual reporting. Second, as a matter of self-preservation, a free press ought to be committed to the maintenance of a free society. Third, members of the press doubtless share the same commitment to the

preservation of human life as most people have. Simply put, reporting news should not put anybody's life in danger.

These principles provide no easy answer to the original question. I have no answer. Whether to resist management of the news by terrorists or yield to their demands in order to save lives is one of the tragic choices terrorists create. If the news media choose not to yield and terrorists kill, let us not make any mistake about where the culpability for such murder lies. It lies with the terrorists who pull the trigger, not with those who reject their tyranny.

